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Prepping for a Covert Overt War

As Hasenfus stands trial, the CIA resumes open aid to the contras

As journalists and spectators jammed the small, steamy courtroom in Managua last week, the trial of Eugene Hasenfus began. Escorted by six guards, the jeans-clad ex-Marine glumly made his way to a seat before the People's Tribunal. For the next 80 minutes, Tribunal President Reynaldo Monterrey read the list of charges: terrorism, violation of public security, conspiracy to commit illicit acts. As Monterrey droned on, it became clear that more was at stake than the fate of Hasenfus, who was captured ferrying weapons to U.S.-backed *contra* rebels after Sandinista troops shot down an American Fairchild C-123K cargo plane over Nicaragua three weeks ago. The prosecution would attempt to try the U.S. Government itself for "Yanqui interventions" dating from the 1850s. Complained former U.S. Attorney General Griffin Bell, a member of Hasenfus' defense team: "He is an absolute pawn."

While Hasenfus squirmed in the limelight, Washington prepared to resume direct aid to the *contras* after the expiration of a two-year congressional ban. Last Friday President Reagan signed an Executive Order authorizing various Government agencies to take responsibility for the \$100 million package. The program will be administered on a day-to-day basis by the CIA and supervised by the State Department. As if to underscore that point, Elliott Abrams, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, traveled to the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa, where he met briefly with President José Azcona Hoyo and then with several senior *contra* leaders.

The military showdown, however, was overshadowed last week by a propaganda battle between Managua and Washington as both sides sought to score points off the Hasenfus trial. Nicaraguan officials, including President Daniel Ortega, have indicated that Hasenfus will be found guilty, then released as early as Thanksgiving. "It's a chance to show Americans how kindhearted they are," scoffed Antonio Tijerino, a Washington-based attorney for the *contras*. U.S. officials, meanwhile, branded the tribunal a kangaroo court. Since it was established in 1983, the court, perhaps unsurprisingly, has had a 99% conviction rate. Each panel consists of a lawyer who serves as its president and two non-lawyers selected from Sandinista defense committees. In the Hasenfus trial, the president was appointed by Justice

Minister Rodrigo Reyes, who will also present the government's case.

Although Hasenfus pleaded not guilty to the wide range of charges, he made several statements to reporters implicating himself and the U.S. Government. "I was caught helping the enemy (of the Sandinistas), killing their people through this aid," he told TIME last week. During that interview, he contradicted earlier state-



Scenes from a failed mission: the ex-Marine in court, an Ilopango runway
Plans are underway to shift to a new air base on a Honduran island.

ments that he had been working directly for the CIA, but he still maintained that the operation was "Government controlled." While the congressional ban was in effect, several retired military officials, including Army Major General John Singlaub and Air Force Major General Richard Secord, had aided the *contras*, insisting that they were doing so as private

citizens. Although skeptics have questioned that claim, there is no hard evidence that any Reagan Administration officials have broken the letter of the law. "If that plane had to go down, now is the best time imaginable," conceded an Administration official. "If it had happened before the [congressional] vote on the funding, we would be up the creek."

Nonetheless, the Hasenfus debacle revealed just how eager the Reagan White House has been to resume military aid to the *contras*. Hoping to deliver weapons in time for the winter dry season, when most of the fighting occurs, U.S. officials encouraged private groups last summer to open supply lines to rebels based inside Nicaragua. Apart from Hasenfus' misbegotten mission, there have been close to 100 successful drops since August, supplying *contras* with as much as 500 tons of weapons, ammunition and matériel.

Now that the U.S. can openly aid the *contras*, the CIA will attempt to perfect the once clandestine supply routes. "We used to have an overt covert program," quipped Minnesota Republican David Durenberger, chairman of the Senate intelligence committee. "Now we have a covert overt operation." As an opening move, the CIA plans to shift the base for supply runs from Ilopango air base in El Salvador and the Aguacate base in Honduras to Great Swan Island, a Honduran island about 150 miles off the country's northeastern coast. According to sources in Central America, Great Swan's airstrip has already been lengthened.

The plan calls for American military aircraft to fly supplies from the U.S. to the island. From there, private planes similar to the downed C-123K transport will make drops into Nicaragua. The move will relieve U.S. pressure on El Salvador and Honduras to accommodate *contra* operations. Since the aid package carries a congressional ban that prohibits U.S. ad-

visers from coming within 20 miles of the Nicaraguan border, the CIA will have to rely on the same network of private contractors, many with past ties to the agency, who have been making runs throughout the fall.

The CIA station chief responsible for daily operations has been working for several months to build relations with *contra* leaders and Honduran military officials.

During that time he has been helped by as many as a dozen CIA operatives, and that number is now growing. U.S. military trainers, however, are expected to carry out their duties elsewhere. The 20-mile border restriction, coupled with Honduran jitters about the *contra* effort, has forced the Defense Department to find training grounds more hospitable than

Centro Instruccion Militar, the main rebel camp in Honduras. Pentagon sources say that sites in Puerto Rico and California are being considered.

With the influx of new funds, the *contra* arsenal is expected to improve over the next six weeks. Pentagon officials say they can provide Stinger and Redeye surface-to-air missiles to combat the Sandinistas' estimated 60 Soviet armored helicopters; the *contras*, however, may opt to buy cheaper, Soviet-built SA-7s on the international arms market. U.S. officials hope to persuade the *contras* to switch from the pressure-triggered mines they have been using to explosives that have to be detonated by remote control, thereby giving the rebels control over specific targets. "Pressure mines kill too indiscriminately," says one. "Pictures of dead children don't go down well in the U.S."

The rebels are expected to go after political targets, like the Interior Ministry's security agents, and to avoid Nicaragua's well-equipped, 119,000-strong armed forces. Meanwhile, U.S. officials will try to convince the top *contra* commanders to move out of their bases in Honduras and push into Nicaragua. The North Atlantic coast, remote and sparsely populated, is considered the most secure place to set up headquarters.

Once the *contras* are firmly established on Nicaraguan soil, Washington might recognize them as a provisional government-in-arms. Such a scenario,

which would require the U.S. to break diplomatic relations with Nicaragua, has been rumored for the past two years. But the Sandinistas apparently are growing more worried. Two weeks ago Carlos Tunnermann, the capable Nicaraguan Ambassador to Washington, gave up that post to become his country's representative to the Organization of American States. Says one U.S. official: "They don't want to lose him, in case the embassy here gets shut down."

As Washington worked on these plans, Eugene Hasenfus awaited his fate, which may be decided as early as this week. "I don't believe we hired ourselves for patriotic reasons," he said last week in Tipitapa, a town outside Managua where he has been imprisoned. "It was done for the dollar mainly." Would he do it again? "If somebody asked me to, I'd ask him if he had all his marbles." Does he feel he is paying for the "sins" of the

U.S.? "Amen. Amen." Surprisingly, many of the Nicaraguans who lingered outside the courtroom seemed sympathetic toward the hapless American. Said one schoolteacher, who waited to catch a glimpse of Hasenfus and his wife Sally: "This is not their place. They should go home." The message, if not the tone, was one that the Sandinista leaders could appreciate. — *By Jill Smolowe. Reported by John Borrell/Tegucigalpa and Laura López/Managua*



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